New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1948

Volume IX, Number 11 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of May 3, 1948

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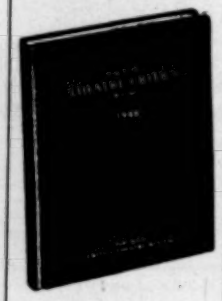

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"Inside U. S. A."

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

MAY 1, 1948

= By HOWARD BARNES =

A Good Place To Be

TWO great clowns are back on Broadway at long last in a jubilant revue. "Inside U. S. A." at the Century, presents Beatrice Lillie and Jack Haley in a variety of antic songs and sketches. For one who thinks the stars can do no wrong, this Arthur Schwartz production is a constant delight. The Schwartz music and the Howard Ditz lyrics have a tendency to become repetitive. Since the songs are witty and sophisticated, it is enough that they serve to let Miss Lillie and Haley strut their stuff. Moreover the show has a magnificent dancer in Valerie Bettis, some scenes of opulent pageantry, a knowing chorus and elegant costumes by Eleanor Goldsmith. "Inside U. S. A." is overlong, but it is a joyous entertainment.

* * *

It owes little more than the title to John Gunther's book. Dietz has roamed around the country in his ditties, getting some wonderful satirical effects with "Come, O Come," dedicated to Pittsburgh; "Blue Grass," which refers to Kentucky, "Rhode Island Is Famous For You," or Massachusetts Mermaid." The composer has given them a pleasant musical accompaniment. Interposed in the melodic sight-seeing tour are sketches of uneven texture. Arnold Auerbach and Arnold B. Horwitt have done a funny bit about Miami Beach, which finds Haley at his pantomimic best called "Forty Winks" and Moss Hart has written a hilarious account of an actress's maid, played uproariously by Miss Lillie, ruining her mistress's opening night. There is no end of clever showmanship at the Century.

* * *

The stars are still the chief distinction of a gala revue offering. Miss Lillie is completely triumphant, whether she is leading a choral, portraying the romantic inspiration of celebrated composers, sitting on a rock in a mermaid costume, prancing through a Mardi Gras, or heckling a leading woman. Absent from Manhattan since before the war, she has merely become more assured and irresistibly funny. Haley, who has been lost to Hollywood for many years, is immense. Either in straight sketches, or in the catchy song about Rhode Island, he is both ludicrous and lyrical. "First Prize at the Fair," in which they appear together, is unfortunately not the best of the material, nor is "We Won't Take It Back," but they buoy up a rather top-heavy show splendidly.

* * *

Of their assistants, the aforementioned Miss Bettis and John Tyers, the singer, give them principal support. The former brought down a highly critical audience at the opening with her lithe movements across the stage, particularly in a number supposedly about San Francisco called "Haunted Heart." Tyers has a rich vocal talent and an attractive personality. Estelle Loring, Thelma Carpenter, J. C. McCord, Albert Popwell and Eric Victor are some of the other engaging performers in a huge cast. "Inside U. S. A." is a munificent musical, calculated to enchant those who fancy the revue form. Helen Tamiris's dance ensembles incidentally are first-rate. Most importantly it has Miss Lillie and Haley romping through the extravaganza brilliantly.

'INSIDE U. S. A.'

A musical revue in two acts, suggested by John Gunther's book; lyrics and music by Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz; sketches by Arnold Auerbach, Moss Hart and Arnold B. Horwitt; production associate, Victor Samrock; dances and musical numbers staged by Helen Tamiris; sketches directed by Robert H. Gordon; production designed by Lemuel Ayers; costumes by Eleanor Goldsmith; evening gowns by Castillo; orchestrations by Robert Russell Bennett; musical conductor, Jay Blackton; incidental music for dances by Genevieve Pitot; presented by Arthur Schwartz at the Century Theater Friday evening, April 30, 1948. The players include Beatrice Lillie, Jack Haley, Estelle Loring, Carl Reiner, Jane Lawrence, Lewis Nye, Beverlee Bozeman, Rod Alexander, William LeMassena, Valerie Bettis, Albert Popwell, J. C. McCord, John Tyers, Ray Stephens, Jim Hawthorne, Eric Victor and Joan Mann.

DAILY NEWS

MAY 1, 1948

'Inside U.S.A.' Owes a Great Debt To Beatrice Lillie, a Great Clown

By JOHN CHAPMAN

What this country needs is more Beatrice Lillies—and the new revue, "Inside U. S. A.," is mighty lucky to have the only one there is. Without her, it would be a pretty good show; with her, it is a whole lot better. Miss Lillie can make anything funny—absolutely anything, including "Medea," I'll bet.

The title of the musical melange which opened last evening at the Century Theatre comes from John Gunther's best-selling book, but its content could just as easily have been inspired by a Socony road map. It is a collection of songs and sketches in which the program says one visits such bulwarks of the Republic as Pittsburgh, Miami, Churchill Downs, Chillicothe, Plymouth Rock, New Orleans and the state of Wyoming. It is not as accurate as Mr. Gunther's book, for the lyrist, Howard Dietz, maintains that the Grand Canyon is in Colorado.

Collaborating with Miss Lillie is Jack Haley, who is most amusing in a sketch about a weary traveler who gets a Miami hotel room equipped with the latest sleep-making devices. All he wants is to fall into bed, but there is so much machinery calculated to induce slumber, including a sheep-jump at the foot of the bed, that the poor guy is badgered into insomnia.

A New Dancer.

"Inside U. S. A." is, for these days, quite a pretentious show, with some handsome settings by Lemuel Ayers. The first-nighters discovered a new favorite in a dancer, Valerie Bettis, who is slinky and sexy and agile. I had my own eye cocked toward a perky and charming girl named Estelle Loring, who worked in a couple of song numbers including one titled "Rhode Island Is Famous for You."

The melodies are by Arthur Schwartz, the best of them being a number called "Haunted Heart" and a Western affair on the order of Billy Hill titled "My Gal Is Mine Once More."

Among the sketches, which mostly are just fair, I can recommend the affair in which Miss Lillie, following the plot of all musical biographies, inspires Chopin, Liszt and Tschaikowsky to creative effort, in which each in turn composes a song called "Burning Lips." Mr. Haley's most valiant effort is a skit about a school which teaches waiters how to annoy patrons.

It is the lady Beatrice who makes the show. As a mermaid on Plymouth Rock, as a queen of the Mardi Gras or as a maid in a stage star's dressing room, she is incomparable. She is funny, even, as an Indian in Albuquerque who, with Mr. Haley as a fellow tribesman, declines the country people are always trying to give back to the Indians. She is a great clown and she is a great humorist. This country should make her the Forty-ninth State.

The New York Times

MAY 1, 1948

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

With some notable assistance from Great Britain, they are celebrating some of the foibles of America in an enormously enjoyable musical revue, "Inside U.S.A.," which opened at the New Century last evening. The little helper-outer from overseas is the angular lady clown, Beatrice Lillie, who has never been more brilliant. Boston has contributed Jack Haley, a joyous mountebank, who is in top form, also.

* * *

If you want to be pedantic about it, most of the material inside "Inside U. S. A." is not distinguished. But you will hardly notice that. For the staging is superb, the settings by Lemuel Ayers are in the best taste and are magnificently lighted and the costumes by Eleanor Goldsmith are lovely and fresh. Howard Dietz, the rhymster, and Arthur Schwartz, the composer, have written a modish score which Russell Bennett has beautifully orchestrated. All the way through, the craftsmanship of "Inside U. S. A." is keen and impeccable. As musical shows go, it is a thoroughbred that represents the best brains in our showshop.

Since everyone knows that B. Lillie is a genius, there is no point in offering that as a discovery. She radiates wit whenever she comes popping on the stage with her jumpy walk, smiling in a sort of bogus embarrassment. Her most riotous sketch is one Moss Hart has written for her. She plays an insanely superstitious maid to a leading lady on an opening night—a savagely-written number which Miss Lillie has worked up into a sardonic nightmare. But there are many other Lillie manifestations—the priggish, unimaginative leader of a choral society, the ravishing inspiration of romantic composers, a mischevious mermaid with an awkward love-life, the gay queen of the New Orleans mardi gras.

* * *

Fantastically costumed and always underplaying with great eloquence, Miss Lillie turns every one of these stock romantic ideas into hard-surfaced burlesque. With a sharp face, piercing eyes, a thin, almost shy grin and only an occasional gesture, Miss Lillie translates everything into the most deliberate and intelligent wit that illuminates the musical stage of our day.

Mr. Haley is the perfect companion. A teettering jester, with his head tossed back like an old-time minstrel, he capers through some very funny numbers. Watch him trying to catch a wink of sleep in a hotel bedroom that has been elaborately and fatally equipped for sleeping. With Estelle Loring, who is also a jaunty singer, he turns a Rhode Island romantic song into something like rag-time. In a caustic sketch by Arnold Auerbach, he teaches apprentice waiters how to make restaurant eaters miserable. Paired with Miss Lillie as a New Mexican Indian, he cites a number of musical ideas why the Indians refuse to take back this demented country. Quizzically lyrical in his style, Mr. Haley is our happiest show jester.

* * *

Most notable of the other diversions is a swift and vivid tabloid ballet danced with great virtuosity by Valerie Bettis and Eric Victor. It is the work of Helen Tamiris; it is original and extraordinarily eloquent. As a wayward hick monologuist from Indiana Herb Shriner introduces a pleasant conversation piece that gets over into Will Rogers' Oklahoma territory.

John Tyers, a baritone with an excellent voice, sings a Wyoming ballad that is one of Mr. Schwartz' best compositions. There is a jubilant country festival to conclude the first act. And to open the meeting, Mr. Dietz and Mr. Schwartz have written a roaring serenade to the U. S. A. which the entire company sings with something approaching rapture. In short, "Inside U. S. A." is a notable Yankee jamboree, not forgetting the spark that has been imported intact from England.

New York World-Telegram

MAY 1, 1948

'Inside U. S. A.' a Smash

Lillie and Haley Pace Fast Revue

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Inside U.S.A." is a lush, bright, beautiful show that does just about everything an extravagant revue can to entertain the customers.

It gives its stars, Beatrice Lillie and Jack Haley, material worthy of their talents. It is full of song hits. Its scenery and costumes are luxurious and bright without being garish. Its dances are alive and fresh, and it introduces to the theater an exciting new personality in the dancer, Valerie Bettis.

The show takes a little while to gather momentum, and even Miss Lillie's siege with the Pittsburgh choral would be more effective if things had warmed up first. With the exciting horse race dance, staged with vigorous invention by Helen Tamiris, things seem sure to be more than all right. And with Miss Lillie's exploitation of classical composers things begin to move like a toboggan.

An Uproarious Sketch.

In this sketch she satirizes the moving picture conception of beautiful girls who inspire great music. It is uproarious, and the Lillie art of howling the house down with a faint smirk or twitch comes into full play.

She later tells what it feels like to be a mermaid, pays a magnificent tribute to New Orleans' Mardi Gras, then tops everything else with her outrageous behavior as a theater maid on a star's opening night.

The star wanders about in shoes that look more like leather bibs than anything else, and wraps the audience around her finger every time she shrugs. She is at her handsome best, and nothing more need be said.

Ingratiating Jack Haley.

Jack Haley is one of the most ingratiating personalities in the theater, and it is a distinct pleasure to have him around. He has developed circles under his eyes to rival those new moon eyebrows, and remembering always how funny he is, it is a surprise to discover again how well he can sing.

He is at his tops conducting a school of waiters, showing them how to irritate the customers to death. Mr. Haley has all the warmth and charm needed for the song about "Rhode Island," and when the mechanical effects are smoothed out a little more, he will undoubtedly make a hilarious interlude of the man being forced to sleep by new inventions.

There was real excitement last night in the two appearances of Valerie Bettis. First in a dance to the lovely "Haunted Heart," and later in a satirical ballet called "Tiger Lily," she literally stopped the show.

Vivid Personality.

Miss Bettis is a vivid physical personality, who dances with graceful violence. Her choreographic ideas are sharp and revealing. No matter how contorted her figures may be, she remembers that she is working with a human body and does not distort it. The lithe freedom of her work is masterful.

Eric Victor does a free-wheeling acrobatic tap dance with great effect in the Wisconsin interlude, and proves himself a master of unique pantomime as the doctor in the Tiger Lily ballet.

Of the others in a highly attractive cast, Estelle Loring stands out for her throaty vocalising of several numbers. John Tyers has the vocal of "Haunted Heart" which is already the show's top hit, and seems even more at home as the cowboy in the Wyoming interlude.

Thelma Carpenter has one song, not one of the score's best, and Albert Popwell does a couple of spectacular dance routines.

Of the other numbers, "Come, O Come" and "First Prize at the Fair" are likely to be heard from frequently. One of the funniest items in the show is "We Won't Take It Back," which the two stars sing as New Mexican Indians. Last night it proved that Miss Lillie can be pretty nearly as funny forgetting lyrics as she is remembering them.

There are striking sets by Lemuel Ayers, particularly the Kentucky race track and the Mardi Gras. They are not only designed richly but they are executed richly.

This looks like a show that could stay around as long as its participants choose to keep it here. It may not delight the backers, but "Inside U.S.A." suggests that it might run three years without paying for itself, a notion that can make an audience feel pleasantly smug about being so generously entertained.

The Sun

MAY 1, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

A New Hit, 'Inside U. S. A.'

"Inside U. S. A." took over the Century Theater last night, putting Beatrice Lillie and Jack Haley back to work, and there'll now be more of a traffic problem than ever at the point where Seventh avenue runs into the park. The new revue is a good, professional show, using the title of John Gunther's popular book and hardly anything else.

The Century's song and dance frolic makes little or no effort to satirize the American scene. Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz have not sought to crowd the flavor and the foibles of the continent into a kaleidoscopic revue. But they do give their scenes geographical labels and they use a from-place-to-place pattern, more or less. And the proceedings are helped along by pleasant songs and pungent lyrics and by that extraordinary buffoon, Miss Lillie.

"Inside U. S. A." shuffles from Miami Beach to Churchill Downs. There's a glimpse of a Wisconsin fair. There's a New Orleans Mardi Gras number and a bit of Wyoming—the Jackson Hole country, in the shadow of the magnificent Tetons. And every now and then the show will forget the notion of dramatizing the countryside and give us such a sketch as Moss Hart's "Better Luck Next Time," with Miss Lillie being hilarious as the superstitious dressing-room maid of a famous star.

The entertainment value of "Inside U. S. A." lies chiefly in its specialties. Such, for instance, as Miss Lillie, as a coy mermaid, perched atop a rock off the Massachusetts shore. Such as the Indiana philosopher and monologist, Herb Shriner—droll, dry and wry and reminiscent of the master, Will Rogers. Such as the song "Rhode Island Is Famous for You," done so engagingly by Jack Halley and the gay and charming Estelle Loring.

"Rhode Island" is probably Arthur Schwartz's best song. His "My Gal Is Mine Once More" is excellent. Howard Dietz catches the feeling of the varying localities with lyrics that are sharp and witty, and there is a stunning and well executed ballet number, "Tiger Lily," a tale of a tabloid murder, which was conceived and put on by Helen Tamiris. Some of the revue's sketch material is pretty feeble, but "Forty Winks," with its assortment of sleep-producing gadgets put to work in a Miami hotel room, is a good one.

Lemuel Ayers has provided colorful and atmospheric settings, and there are fine costumes by Eleanor Goldsmith. Ayers's background for the Kenosha county fair grounds in the Wisconsin number, which gives the show its first-act finale, is particularly effective.

Miss Lillie is in great form all evening. This roguish and rompish comedienne, who is so expert in her timing and in her grimaces, can stop a show by lifting an eyebrow. She is at her best in the dressing room skit, which has a flat ending, and when she appears as a solemn and beaded Indian woman, selling beads and curios to passengers of the Super Chief on the long platform at Albuquerque.

The dead-pan, white-faced and effortless Jack Haley is steadily entertaining. Valerie Bettis, the Tiger Lily, dances spectacularly. And such players as Jane Lawrence, Carl Reiner, John Tyers, Eric Victor, William LeMassena and Rod Alexander contribute zestfully to the proceedings.

Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz, borrowing a title from John Gunther—for which he will receive ample compensation—have put together a lively show. "Inside U. S. A." is a new and solid hit.

Journal American

MAY 1, 1948

It Could Be a Ziegfeld Follies But Something New Is Added

By ROBERT GARLAND

Last night, at the Century, while Arthur Schwartz's "Inside U. S. A." was hopping, skipping and jumping from Pittsburgh to Miami, Louisville to Chillicothe, New Orleans to Chicago and Albuquerque to Manhattan, the late Florenz Ziegfeld kept coming to my mind. Were he alive and ticking, I told myself, this could have been his "Follies of 1948."

I doubt if "Inside U. S. A." is the serio-comic book show it started out to be. Having begged, borrowed or bought the title of John Gunther's best-selling travelogue, the collaborators—Howard Dietz, Arthur Schwartz, Arnold Auerbach, Moss Hart and Arnold Horwitt—forgot about the contents of Mr. Gunther's great big bountiful survey.

Which is quite all right with me, as I never got beyond the New York and Maryland sections, anyway. What the collaborators have compiled instead is a Ziegfeld-like revue in which, between opening and finale, sketch follows song with standard regularity, with an occasional ballet to drive away any possible monotony.

These ballets, conceived and staged by Helen Tamiris and featuring Valerie Bettis and Eric Victor, are honorific, original and just as if Agnes de Mille had not been born.

• • •

Valerie Bettis' big dancing number is to the tune of "Haunted Heart" and follows John Tyers' resolute rendition of that familiar song. Eric Victor's big dancing number is to the tune of "First Prize at the Fair" and, with that familiar song, brings the first-act curtain down on the Fair Grounds in Kenosha County, in the State of Wisconsin.

Together, they're the Tiger Lily and Dr. Zilmore of a tabloid ballet which is more honorific and original than anything the Ballet Theatre has brought about this season. In "Inside U. S. A." Miss Bettis makes her Broadway debut as a dancer, although she designed dances for "Beggar's Holiday." Mr. Victor danced fleetingly in "Sadie Thompson."

The sketches, as did those in Mr. Ziegfeld's "Follies," range from good to fair to reminiscent.

The good one for Jack Haley, co-starred with Beatrice Lillie, is "Forty Winks." The good one for Beatrice Lillie, co-starred with Jack Haley, is "Better Luck Next Time." This, as "Out of This World," she did in London in a show called "Better Late."

The fair ones are only fair. The most reminiscent one is "We Won't Take It Back," founded on the "Give It Back to the Indians," which Rogers and Hart wrote for "Too Many Girls."

• • •

Let me tell you that, from Coast to Coast, from town to town, Miss Lillie and Mr. Haley enjoy themselves tremendously. And last night's first audience found fun in their enjoyment. When their material was good, they were very, very funny. When their material was so-so, they were Bee and Jack working trooper-like together. Their teamwork is wonderful!

So, in one way or another, are the title song which opens the evening, the "Come, O Come to Pittsburgh" choral, as directed by Miss Lillie; the sleep-helping gadgets devised for Mr. Haley's "Forty Winks"; the idea rather than the execution of "A Song to Forget," and all of the Jack Haley-Estelle Loring rendition of "Rhode Island Is Famous for You."

To these please add Miss Lillie's Mardi Gras foolery when the revue reaches New Orleans; George S. Kaufman's "suggestion" for "School for Waiters"; the lady star's impersonation of Gladys, the maid, in "Better Luck Next Time"; Lemuel Ayers' imaginative productions; Russell Bennett's orchestrations and the excellent orchestra under Jay Blackton...

When I come again to think of it, "Inside U. S. A." does put me in mind of the late Florenz Ziegfeld and a "Follies of 1948" that might have been. Such a comparison is praise, indeed!

Daily Mirror
MAY 1, 1948

'Inside U. S. A.' Is A Handsome Hit

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Arthur Schwartz did Broadway a tremendous favor by luring Beatrice Lillie and Jack Haley back to Broadway. They arrived last evening at the Century Theatre in a breezy, amusing and handsome hit called "Inside U. S. A.," which has one of the biggest advance sales ever rung up by a musical revue.

Miss Lillie impersonates a theatrical star's macabre maid and a Puritan mermaid, the Queen of a Mardi Gras and the leader of a choral society as only she can. Haley wrestles with the modern conveniences of a swank hotel and opinion poll samplers, portrays the headmaster of a school for obnoxious waiters and a guy who thinks a gal from Rhode Island is grand.

Miss Lillie and Haley also team up during the evening as bungling participants at a county fair and a pair of smart Indians who taunt the suckers alighting at a Western railroad station. And they are riotously funny. They turn the Arnold Auerbach, Moss Hart and Arnold Horwitt skits into comedy gold.

Producer Schwartz has teamed with lyricist Howard Dietz to write a score that already has become the delight of nitery and radio bands. Best of the serious songs, of course, is "Haunted Heart." And there are several topical and humorous numbers that fit Lillie, Haley and associates beautifully.

Robert Gordon has done an admirable job with the book and Helen Tamiris has contributed choreography that clicks. Valerie Bettis and Eric Victory won robust salutes for their stepping of the Tamiris figures. Victor does amazing things with his fingers and hands as well as his feet.

Miss Tamiris, incidentally, has one of the best character dancers about in her ensemble. He's Boris Runanin, who used to be a standout in Ballet Theatre's "Bluebird."

Others meriting citations are Herb Shriner, John Tyers, Estelle Loring, Jane Lawrence, Thelma Carpenter and Joan Mann.

Shriner, graduate of vaudeville and nightclub stages, is an ingratiating monologist. His homespun gab about a hick town in Indiana won the lusty approval of the sophisticated first nighters. Tyers has a he-man voice that really sells a couple of Schwartz and Deitz's chansons.

The Lemuel Ayers sets and Eleanor Goldsmith-Castillo costumes are eye-fillers.

"Inside U.S.A." is a show on which you can honestly shower superlatives. It is fast, gay, tuneful, Lillie and Haley. Yep, for our money you can add Lillie and Haley to your list of synonyms for wonderful.

Take our advice and try to obtain a pair of ducats for "Inside U. S. A." immediately. They will be as difficult to find as a horse that wants to run against Citation and Coaltown in the Kentucky Derby.

New York Post
MAY 1, 1948

A Bright and Tuneful Revue Suggested by John Gunther

By Richard Watts Jr.

Ever since they collaborated on "The Band Wagon," one of the landmarks in the history of the American revue, the names of Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz have been famous in musical-comedy writing. Ever since they were first heard of in the theatre, the names of Beatrice Lillie and Jack Haley have been honored in the field of superior hilarity. Put them all together in the making of a girl-and-music show suggested by John Gunther's justly celebrated best-seller, "Inside U. S. A." and the chances of a smash success are almost certain. Friday night at the Century Theatre things turned out in exactly that way.

The fanciest audience of the season, including such spectacular playgoers as Elsa Maxwell and her companions, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, saw a bright and spectacular revue, with brilliant lyrics by Mr. Dietz, some delightful music by Mr. Schwartz, characteristic clowning by Miss Lillie and Mr. Haley, excellent dancing by Valerie Bettis and Eric Victor, and the best homespun monologist since Will Rogers in a new crackerbarrel humorist named Herb Shriner. If they didn't find a show which quite lived up to its ambitious hope of being a satirical tour of the nation, they at least encountered a happy approximation thereof.

I have a suspicion that the manufacturers of "Inside U.S.A." were more ingenious than successful in their determination to make all the numbers in their revue fit into its pattern of topical Americana, but their gallant efforts to do so are among its most entertaining features. To show Miss Lillie in the fascinating guise of a mermaid and to present a sketch burlesquing those movies about the love affairs of great composers, and to keep the scheme of the show going by labeling the lady comic a "Massachusetts Mermaid" and calling the sketch "Chillicothe, Ohio" may be cheating a bit. But to say so is probably quibbling.

Since "Inside U. S. A." is certain to be a hit, and deserves to be, I may be excused a few more quibbles before going in for my list of enthusiasms. Although the two stars are funny enough to make almost any revue number amusing, I found most of the sketches a little disappointing. Arnold Auerbach, Arnold B. Horwitt and Moss Hart are expert sketch writers, and the ones they have contributed have their points, but all of them end flatly. There is likewise an occasional suggestion throughout the evening that Mr. Schwartz, with a splendid score and two exceptional comics to enliven his show, hasn't quite used such valuable commodities to the most complete advantage.

But the virtues are something to be happy about. Half a dozen of the songs, for example, are worth all the popularity they are already achieving. I think my favorite is an enchanting number called "First Prize at the Fair," but "Rhode Island Is Famous for You" is almost its equal, and I have vast admiration for "Come, O Come to Pittsburgh," "Churchill Downs," "My Gal Is Mine Once More" and the satirical "We Won't Take It Back" which seems to me considerably better than the celebrated "Civilization." I also like "Haunted Heart," but somewhat less enthusiastically. All of them reveal what a really skillful lyric writer Mr. Dietz is, and how attractive Mr. Schwartz' music can be.

As every one knows, Miss Lillie is an incomparable lady clown, and she is just as wonderful as ever in "Inside U. S. A." Although Mr. Hart's sketch about an unfortunate actress, who is driven mad by her superstitious maid on opening night, has a flat conclusion, it shows her in her best and most characteristic form, and in everything she does she is a delight. Mr. Haley, one of the best and least appreciated comedians on the American stage, is always a pleasure to encounter, and he is truly a pillar of strength to the current proceedings. By the way I wish Miss Lillie hadn't dropped a fine song called "Atlanta" from her numbers in the new show.

While I am highly suspicious of ballets, there is one in the Schwartz-Dietz show that is a delight. A satirical piece about a beautiful Chicago murderess, it has been humorously and imaginatively staged by Helen Tamaris, and it is brilliantly danced by Valerie Bettis and Eric Victor. In fact, Miss Bettis, a striking and exciting young dancer, is one of the greatest successes of the evening. I have already mentioned Herb Shriner, a modest and engaging fellow who chats amusingly and with great sagacity to the audience on matters personal and topical. When he remarked casually that "a lot of people in Washington are afraid the Russians will start something—and a lot are afraid they won't!" I felt certain he was better than Will Rogers.

"The Play's the Thing"

DAILY NEWS

APRIL 29, 1948

Calhern, Margetson Make Fun in Nice Revival of 'Play's the Thing'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Ferenc Molnar's "The Play's the Thing" dates clear back to 1926. It is a Hungarian's version of a French sex comedy. It is such a fluffy little piece it has barely the slightest substance. But, far from being handicaps, its age, its type and its frailties are virtues in Gilbert Miller's new production at the Booth Theatre, and we first-nighters had a very pleasant time last evening.

Mr. Miller has dressed the comedy and directed it with style, and has found a number of amiable and graceful actors for it—notably Louis Calhern and Arthur Margetson. Faye Emerson, making her Broadway debut, is entirely acceptable as a comedienne and a pretty dish, too. Her husband and her mother-in-law, who were sweating it out in second-row seats, needed not to look as worried as they did.

As in all Hungarian comedies of the golden Twenties, "The Play's the Thing" is set in a cozy never-never land—in this case, a castle on the Italian Riviera where guests arrive and spend days without seeing their host; where the servants all are perfect Jeeveses (P. G. Wodehouse, by the way, wrote the adaptation), where a telephone operator is stationed at the castle's private switchboard, and where champagne and brandy flow like beer at a bowling tournament.

The Perfect Alibi.

In this dream place gather a playwright, his theatrical associate, a young composer, a young prima donna and an old actor. The composer loves the prima donna, but is desolated when he overhears some spicy bedroom conversation between the girl and the ambitious old actor. The playwright saves the romance by writing, between 4 and 6 A. M. (the shank of the evening on the Molnar Riviera), a dramatic sketch in which the spicy conversation turns out to be quite innocent and ordinary. Prima donna and old actor rehearse it and young composer is vastly relieved. That's all. Hardly enough to make an operetta.

It is all, but it is enough, because the talk is deftly written and the players are just right. Mr. Margetson is delightfully funny as the actor and Mr. Calhern, as the playwright, has the slightly amused, slightly bored air of the perfect sophisticate. There are other pleasant performances by Richard Hylton, Francis Compton and Claud Allister.

My own enjoyment of "The Play's the Thing" stems, I think, from a sense of relief. For a good long time now everything in the theatre has been "about" something. Musical comedies have become social documents, dramas have been dramatic and comedies have been carrying secret messages. I'm glad Mr. Miller dug up a play which is entirely inconsequential but is, nevertheless, friendly, fairly witty and well staged.

'THE PLAY'S THE THING.'

Play by Ferenc Molnar, adapted from the Hungarian by P. G. Wodehouse; directed by Gilbert Miller; lighting by Ralph Alswang; gowns by Castillo; setting by Oliver Messel; presented by Gilbert Miller, in association with James Russo and Michael Ellis, at the Booth Theater Wednesday evening, April 28, 1948. The cast:

Sandor Turai ..... Louis Calhern
Mansky ..... Ernest Cossart
Albert Adam ..... Richard Hylton
Johann Dwornitschek ..... Francis Compton
Ilona Szabo ..... Faye Emerson
Almady ..... Arthur Margetson
Mell ..... Claud Allister
Lackeya ..... Ted Paterson and Fred Wentler

SYNOPSIS: The entire action of the play takes place in a room in a castle on the Italian Riviera. Act I—About 2 a. m. Act II—About 4 a. m. Act III—About 7:30 p. m.

New York World-Telegram

APRIL 29, 1948

'The Play's the Thing' A Pleasant Revival

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

It is 22 years since "The Play's the Thing," revived last night, was first produced in New York. It is a frivolous conceit, based on the mildest notion of a plot and decked out with ingenious tricks and quips.

The play often gets leisurely and talky as it works toward the delightful last act, which is its real reason for existence. There is nothing about this dawdling with human frailty that is particularly dated. It is chiefly amusing, just as it is old-fashioned, because nobody nowadays takes the trouble to spin out such comedies with the principal ingredient one's own dramaturgical cleverness.

One feels that Molnar's first consideration in writing "The Play's the Thing" was entertaining himself. But he did it well enough to entertain and surprise audiences.

Playwright's Own Drama.

His idea here has been to show how a playwright can practice his craft in real life. Turai and his collaborator, Mansky, bring their young composer, Albert, on a surprise visit to an Italian castle. Also there is Ilona, their prima donna, and also Albert's fiancee.

The young man overheard his beloved in an impassioned conversation with an actor. Turai contrives to make it appear that the conversation was actually a rehearsal of a play. Overnight he writes a play which includes their heated dialogue, and saves the love affair.

This transparent story never takes itself seriously, and is nothing more than a pattern for Molnar to color with wit and impertinent informality.

At the curtain's rise the playwrights discuss how best to start a play, and end up casually introducing themselves to the audience. Toward the end of the second act the characters take turns showing what a second-act curtain ought to be.

Third Act Riotous.

The third riotous act is a barbed satire showing just how ridiculous a writer can make an actor appear, particularly when the actor is in no position to protest.

It is this scene, a rehearsal of the play within the play, which makes the evening Arthur Margetson's. As a pompous and thoroughly self-satisfied thespian, he is forced to recite a series of lines which are not only impossible to pronounce or remember but are outrageously self derogatory.

Mr. Margetson's growing fury and his utter helplessness are projected with expert timing and effectiveness.

For the first two acts, the part of the playwright, Turai, has most of the lines, and throughout the play he is in control of the situation. Louis Calhern has as much right as any other first-rate actor to choose his own interpretation of a role, but here he has proceeded on a concept that does little to bolster a thin play.

Shows Off Arrogance.

Turai's impertinence and verbosity grow from arrogance. His lines are often interesting solely because he believes whatever he has to say is wise and significant. Sometimes it is neither.

Mr. Calhern plays casually, throwing away lines and dropping ends of sentences until they are inaudible. His is hardly the manner of a man who expects and gets the obedience of those about him to his slight whims.

Faye Emerson makes an auspicious Broadway debut as the prima donna. She is extremely handsome, plays with authority, and gets the grainy quality of a woman of wilful temperament and morals.

Claud Allister is entirely assured and successful as the jittery secretary, and there are dryly comic performances by Ernest Cossart as the second playwright, and Francis Compton as a garrulous butler.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

APRIL 29, 1948

By HOWARD BARNES

"Quite the Thing"

A CAPTIVATING revival of "The Play's the Thing" has come to the Booth to enliven the tag-end of a season. The P. G. Wodehouse adaptation of Ferenc Molnar's somewhat sardonic farce has weathered twenty-two years valiantly. Gilbert Miller has given it every sanction, both as producer and director. He has assembled such able actors as Louis Calhern, Arthur Margetson, Ernest Cossart and Francis Compton to give a period place a scintillating and witty reproduction. In addition he has brought Faye Emerson on from Hollywood to demonstrate that she can weave quite a spell on the stage. Chiefly, he has staged the show with the pace and comic crescendo which is so all-important to a piece of spoofing.

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Molnar was frankly kidding when he composed this account of a celebrated Hugarian playwright, (obviously himself), extricating his colleagues and star from an embarrassing situation. Having discovered his composer's fiancee in what the French term flagrant delit in a castle on the Italian Riviera, the dramatist writes a script which describes the whole incident in the most innocent terms, even to the satisfaction of the jealous music-maker. It is, and always was, a trick play, but is exceedingly gay in the current offering. The Wodehouse translation of Molnar's farcical notions is only slightly tarnished. The performing makes it definitely agreeable.

Calhern has the wheel-horse job in the revival and he handles it superbly. He picks up the somewhat tattered threads of the farce on every occasion and weaves them into a skein of laughter. The final scene, in which he gives an aging Lothario a going-over, is a brilliant piece of timing and significant gestures. Even when the play becomes a bit too broad for comfort, the star is on hand to carry it through to a satisfying conclusion. When Compton is on hand, in a rather irrelevent role of a butler in the castle, there is not little merriment at the Booth.

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Miss Emerson is making her theatrical debut in "The Play's the Thing." While she started awkwardly on her first assignment, she wound up with considerable triumph. As the predatory actress who could not withstand the latter-day advances of a former lover, unmindful that her fiancee was listening in, she is attractive and promising. Margetson has a field day as the villain and Cossart is as good as ever in the part of playwright's collaborator. Richard Hylton and Claud Allister are others in the company. It is hand-picked and makes the most of an old play in "The Play's the Thing."

New York Post

APRIL 29, 1948

'The Play's the Thing' Agreeably Revived

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

It was twenty-two years ago, when the world was young if not innocent, that Molnar's gay and playful charade, "The Play's the Thing," had its triumphant New York premiere, with that superb actor, the late Holbrook Blinn, giving a famous performance in the leading role. Now that we are old and even less innocent, some of the original freshness has worn off of the Danube boulevardier's debonair comedy, and the memory of Mr. Blinn haunts it for us old-timers. But, as revived last night at the Booth Theatre, with Louis Calhern in the Blinn role, it retains a surprising amount of its high spirits, sprightliness and charm.

If, as I say, something of its pristine gayety has departed, this is in great part atoned for by the addition of an almost wistful kind of nostalgic charm. It is not that "The Play's the Thing" has developed an unexpected romantic atmosphere of lavender and old lace. It is merely that, in this serious-minded day, the stage has lost its old-time relish in using the theatre theatrically in frank joyousness over the fact that it is theatrical. The Molnar comedy has a lot of that sheer delight in the theaticality of the theatre, and it is a strangely winning and appealing quality.

Mr. Margetson

Another tremendous virtue of the revival is the presence in the cast of Arthur Margetson, one of the most amusing actors on the American stage. He has the role in which Reginald Owen made a tremendous hit in the original production, but even the notoriously romantic memories of veteran playgoers can conjure up no ghosts to overwhelm the current performance. As a pompous thespian, forced by a vengeful playwright to play a part filled with endless strings of French names and humiliating references to himself, Mr. Margetson performs the miracle of being even funnier than the graybeard recollections of Mr. Owen.

The light and bantering argument of the play, as you may have heard, deals with an urbane and understanding playwright, who comes to the rescue of a young friend in a romantic crisis. The young man has overheard his fiancee and an actor she had once been in love with in some extremely suspicious conversation. It then becomes the playwright's task to convince the innocent youth that the pair had merely been rehearsing a scene, and he has to write a play overnight which will include the dialogue that had been eavesdropped upon and, in the process, contain for the actor a particularly unbearable role.

Molnar's Art

I suppose this isn't very much for three acts, and there are certainly occasions when the fun runs down, but there is a lot of laughter in it and the third act is especially hilarious. It is at its best not only in the scene written for the actor but in the moments when Molnar toys with his own art. The beginning, with three of the characters contemplating the way a play should start, and the end of the second act, when three methods of dropping a curtain are contemplated, represent the playwright in his best mood of brightly theatrical improvisation. Then there is a delightful butler, the best serving man since the great William in Shaw's "You Never Can Tell."

Memories of Holbrook Blinn do get in the way of Louis Calhern's portrayal of the playwright, but Mr. Calhern is a knowing actor and he is engagingly bland and humorous. Francis Compton is perfect as the perfect butler. The veteran Ernest Cossart is at home as the hero's less brilliant collaborator, and Claud Allister has the amusing bit that he played with the original cast. Faye Emerson makes her local stage debut in the colorless role of the girl in the case, and she is hardly experienced enough to overcome its thankless difficulties. In the end, it is really Mr. Margetson's show, and an agreeable one.

Journal American

APRIL 29, 1948

High, Adult Comedy By High, Adult Cast

By ROBERT GARLAND

After almost exactly twenty years, Pelham Granville Wodehouse's adaptation of Ferenc Molnar's "The Play in the Castle" is again on Broadway. Gilbert Miller, in association with a Mr. Russo and a Mr. Ellis, has revived it right regally at the Booth with Louis Calhern as the Molnar-like playwright.

In the Broadway season of 1926-27, "The Play's the Thing," as it is called in English, was up among the official ten best non-musicals. Preceding it were "Broadway," "Saturday's Children," "Chicago," "The Constant Wife" and "The Road to Rome." It was then considered quite a little daring.

That was the season in which Mr. Miller, as director of the Charles Frohman Company, produced not only "The Play's the Thing," but Arthur Hornblow's adaptation of Edouard Bourdet's "The Captive." Closed by the authorities, the latter was discovered after 160 consecutive performances.

Nobody thought of closing "The Play's the Thing," however. With Holbrook Blinn in Mr. Calhern's role, it kept on going. In 1928, Mr. Miller revived it for the first time, with Selena Royale taking over for Catherine Dale Owen. Miss Owen was among last night's audience.

With nothing on its mind but the lightest sort of laughter, "The Play's the Thing" never takes itself seriously. So there's no reason for you to take it seriously, either. At the Booth, you find the author of "Liliom" and "The Guardsman" in his most inconsequential mood.

In a castle on the Italian Riviera, in the days when the First World War had, we thought made the world safe for human beings, three dinner-jacketed men assemble. Sandor Turai, celebrated playwright; Mansky, his less celebrated collaborator; and Albert Adam.

Young Albert Adam is in love with, and engaged to, Ilona Szabo, a predatory prima donna whose loyalty is broad minded. They overhear that loose but lovely lady bidding a fond, if far from final, farewell to an actor

named Almady. Albert is baffled, bothered and bewildered!

But leave it to Sandor Turai, his guide, as it were, philosopher and friend. Playwright that he is, he turns the Szabo-Almady affair into an undress rehearsal, providing a play within a play. Merely to watch Herr Turai get his curtains down is high and adult fooling.

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Such high and adult fooling calls for high and adult comedians. With these Gilbert Miller's second Broadway revival is well provided. Not since "Brief Moment" with Francine Larrimore —she, too, was there last evening —has Louis Calhern possessed a part so suited to his talents.

As Ilona Szabo, the predatory prima donna, Faye Emerson makes her Broadway bow in three dimensions. Lovely to look at, delightful to listen to, Miss Emerson is engaging as a performer. Out front, in the second row, Elliott Roosevelt and his mother enjoyed her as much as we did.

Arthur Margetson is a wise and wonderful Almady, especially in the French-filled rehearsal scene in which he tells Ilona of his estates in Pardubien-Grand Amanoir and his castles in the Challenges-Debicourt de la Romance and at Rivalleux-Quandamouzieres Sur Vanteraux Alpes Maritimes.

Well on the burlesque side, this last act of the revival at the Booth is as funny as anything in town. Then, and before, Ernest Cossart is an excellent Manasky. As Albert Adam, Richard Hylton's Oklahoma "R-s" still betray him . . . "The Play's the Thing" remains a high and adult comedy, highly and adultly refurbished for this Atomic Age.

Daily Mirror

APRIL 29, 1948

'Play's the Thing' Is Slick Comedy

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Broadway has been needing an amusing comedy for quite a spell, and it got it last evening when Gilbert Miller, in association with James Russo and Michael Elliz, revived "The Play's the Thing" at the Booth. The P. G. Wodehouse adaptation of the Ferenc Molnar script again is used.

"The Play's the Thing" has become something of a legend since it was first produced here with the great Holbrook Blinn starred. So we went to the Booth last evening hoping that it would not show its age and that the current cast would not let down the original.

It is our pleasure to report that we were needlessly apprehensive on both scores. The comedy bears its years well and the present company does it justice. The result is one of the most delightful evenings to be found along the Rialto.

"The Play's the Thing," you may recall, is something of a light paraphrase of Hamlet's use of a dramatic device to achieve an end. He used it to trap a king, while Playwright Sandor Turai calls on it to extricate a prima donna from an embarrassing situation.

Sandor, his collaborator and his protegé arrive at a castle on the Riviera for a holiday. And the protege, a young composer, overhears an amorous dialogue between his fiancee and her coach. So Sandor hurriedly concocts a script embracing the speeches and giving them an innocuous meaning.

Louis Calhern is excellent as Sandor. He plays him suavely and effectively, losing none of the brittle humor of the part. Arthur Margetson, perhaps the most underrated actor on our stage, has a field day as the coach. His performance in Sandor's sardonic burlesque is a gem. It had the first nighters roaring.

Francis Compton, another first rate actor, makes the role of a shrewd butler important. Claud Allister contributes one of his inimitable muddle-headed Englishmen. Ernest Cossart and Richard Hylton do credit to the other masculine roles.

Making her debut on Broadway, Faye Emerson is an eye tonic as the prima donna. She acts with a sincerity that helps to mask her lack of experience. She was particularly good in the run-through of the sketch with Margetson.

Miller's direction proves that he has not forgotten any of the chuckles in the original production. Taking players with different acting styles, he has rehearsed them into a remarkably unified performance.

"The Play's the Thing" is recommended to all who enjoy slick, sophisticated comedy. We only regret that it didn't arrive sooner. It fills a spot that's been empty on Broadway most of the season.

The Sun

APRIL 29, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

Rather Mild Evening at Booth

Perhaps "The Play's the Thing" should have been permitted to remain in undisturbed slumber. Ferenc Molnar's comedy, brought back to life last evening at the Booth, has not become a relic with the passing of twenty-two years, but it is now only mildly diverting. The gayety that remains comes through spasmodically.

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Gilbert Miller has given the piece fond direction and a neat production. Without going into the sheer brilliance of the late Holbrook Blinn, I readily concede that Louis Calhern is a knowing and skillful actor and, upon occasion—such an occasion as "The Magnificent Yankee"—one of the theater's best. But Blinn's magic is missing at the Booth and the Molnar joke is now a little thin.

In "The Play's the Thing," as you may or may not recall, a famous dramatist, one Sandor Turai, writes an impromptu play to save the romance of a beautiful prima donna and the young composer to whom she is engaged. He has overheard, in a thin-walled castle on the Italian Riviera, an amorous scene between her and an erstwhile lover, a maturing and marked-down matinee idol. The situation is fairly desperate. It is then that the resourceful Turai puts the incriminating dilalogue into a hastily written play, and demands a performance of it from the prima donna and the actor, and with the wretched composer listening and looking on. Result; happy ending!

Arthur Margetson is the member of Gilbert Miller's cast who comes off best in the evening's proceedings. He is richly comical in his explosiveness, and in his blustering and swaggering, as the aging actor. Ernest Cossart is pleasantly around as Turai's collaborator. Francis Compton is amusing as a Wodehouse-like butler, and so is Claud Allister as the harassed property man for the play-within-a-play. Richard Hylton is more or less lost in the vague part of the wretched composer.

Faye Emerson, good-looking, spirited and attractively gowned, makes her Broadway debut as the heroine of the Booth's new production. She is not completely successful, but she is playing one of the silliest roles ever written for an actress and I shall withhold judgment on her capacities for the stage until her next appearance. In a summertime appearance in George Oppenheimer's flip comedy, "Here Today," done two seasons ago, she was entirely delightful.

"The Play's the Thing," well lighted by Ralph Alswang, and with a nice setting by Oliver Messel, retains a measure of its spontaneity, and it comes as a vast improvement on Broadway's springtime fare. But it's my unyielding notion that the fun is now pretty spotty and that the comedy is by no means as festive as it used to be.